Good Practice Guide for Social Workers & Managers in How to Include Fathers
Introduction

Many research activities devote much attention to causality but little time and space is given to the practical application of new practice to redress the identified problems. I approached this research differently as I want to support social workers develop their practice\(^1\).

For eighteen months a group of children and family social workers and managers experimented together testing out alternative techniques to identify, engage and work with fathers. Fifty seven cases were analysed where fathers had been successfully engaged to identify techniques that have been successfully employed to work with, often abusive, fathers. We also met together reviewing and reflecting how as practitioners we could improve father engagement. Practice initiatives were identified through analysis of the transcripts of these meetings. Here is what we discovered:

- **Part 1**

1. Principles of Good Practice with Fathers

   - The self-perception of manliness and fatherhood are deeply rooted and interrelated. In all cultures, being a man is constructed with longstanding and powerful meaning and these meanings vary across cultures, ethnicities and class. As a practitioner you need to understand masculinity and contemporary fatherhood if you are to accurately assess fathers and family dynamics.

   - Social workers must be aware of the insidious and endemic nature of power and gender relations and how this affects their practice and the children and vulnerable women, and other marginalised groups.

   - Social workers should be prepared to work with men and support them be better parents by assisting them with their parenting skills or supporting them address addictions, illness or violence.

   - Recognise the value of fathers to children

   - Commit to the empowerment of marginalised fathers, (in terms of them becoming better partners and parents).
- Be aware of your own assumptions, prejudices and personal biography that may influence your view of fathers. (Consider how your experience of your own father influences your practice).

- Be empathetic to fathers. This is not easy when working with abusers but remember he is far more threatened than you.

- Be respectful. Respect has a particular relevance for men. This is evident through popular culture about respect and disrespect in the masculine worlds for example; in sport and music. If social workers communicate respect throughout their interventions then they are more likely to engage the father and keep him involved in their intervention.

- Consistency; Practitioners need to be consistent in what they say, in the information they provide and in their authenticity and in the way they treat fathers.

- Value and understand the importance of fathers to case planning and involve them, (where safe), in every aspect of case management from assessment to closure.

- Be prepared to understand the issues that uniquely effect fathers. For example: non-residential, Black, ethnic minority and white working class fathers all have unique circumstances and pressures that need to be understood and assessed.

- Practitioners must commit to involving the father and the paternal extended family from the earliest possible opportunity in the assessment.

- Family Group Conferences need to be used as early as possible within the assessment stage.

- Practitioners need to be flexible and willing to engaging violent / abusive men.

- Social workers should be expected to demonstrate ‘due diligence’ in their efforts to locate the father and this should become a practice expectation.

- Fathers are expected to be on time and therefore so should social workers.

- Do not minimise domestic violence
Recognise that many fathers are vulnerable and will either withdraw or be threatening as a form of defence.

Remember, fathers may be abusive but research indicates that 90% of children regularly see their fathers, (following separation), and most children want to maintain a relationship with their fathers, even if they are abusive. In referred cases it is likely that the child is having contact with the father, (if non-resident).

Always investigate the father’s involvement in cases of child maltreatment.


2. Identifying Fathers

➢ We must exhaust all options to locate fathers. Be curious, creative and persistent; make time to investigate (even if there are multiple fathers as any of them could be a risk and resource).

➢ Contact the GP, (research indicates that if men have a problem they are most likely to tell their GP, research also indicates men use the same GPs as their partners and rarely change their GP).

➢ Use Facebook
➢ Speak to the professional network surrounding the child. Does the school, children centre, health visitor, midwife, maternity unit, local community police officer, hospital know the father’s name?

➢ Ask the maternal and paternal extended families.

➢ Locate a copy of the birth certificate

➢ Undertake local authority and police checks

➢ Undertake Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and Inland Revenue checks.

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2 There is a prerequisite in relation to the guidance on identifying fathers which is; that it is safe to do so.
➢ Contact the Child Support Agency

➢ Contact the Child Maintenance Information Commission who oversees the CSA.

➢ Contact the local Authority Community Charge Team

➢ Ensure accurate information is requested and recorded on the case files, (i.e. the correct telephone numbers and addresses for the father and paternal extended family).

➢ Mothers will often ‘gate-keep’ the father’s identity. (Research evidences this occurs in 66% of all cases). Do not give up. Ask at every meeting and challenge her non-compliance and explain the benefits of contact with the father. US research suggests that social workers should recruit fathers through mothers, to focus on a strengths-based empowerment model of intervention that includes a range of parental support programmes. (Featherstone et al: 2010, Hahn et al: 2009).

➢ Always identify whether a man is living (or visiting) the family home. Check the basics, are there a man’s clothes in the home etc.


3. Engaging Fathers

➢ Address fathers by name. Correspondence needs to be sent to the father and mother separately and needs to be addressed directly to the parent using their name (not simply saying Dear Parent but Mr Smith or Mr Johnson), as research evidences men respond to individual attention.

➢ Engage him as early as possible in the social work intervention

➢ Assess his role, how he views the maltreatment, his role, his opinion and what he could have done to prevent the maltreatment, his role models, his views of discipline, his aggression and anger and his controlling or manipulative behaviour. Also the relationship between the father and mother and any involvement from other men in the children’s and mother’s life need to be included as part of the assessment

3 There is a prerequisite in relation to the guidance on engaging fathers which is; that it is safe to do so.
❖ Be prepared to build a relationship based on trust

❖ Use a strengths based approach; men respond well to praise.

❖ Managing the complications of parental conflict, especially financial related conflicts can be extremely problematic for practitioners and will often prevent mothers and fathers from working together in the interests of children. (If the non-residential father is involved in the child’s life he is more likely to contribute financially).

❖ Always visit prison when fathers are incarcerated.

❖ Give parental tips to fathers

❖ Where it is safe for the woman, interview parents together, (although giving both parents the opportunity to be seen alone during the intervention).

❖ Discuss the emotional needs of the child.

❖ Discuss discipline and boundaries: every father needs to understand and learn strategies for managing his child’s behaviour and managing the father’s anger. The social worker’s role is to offer the father guidance on discipline as well as assist him understand the roots of his anger and establish an agreement over what is acceptable discipline. i.e. the salient themes to a positive strategy for discipline and boundaries are:

➢ Adopt a high praise, high warmth and low criticism parenting style
➢ Establish clear rules and administer them consistently
➢ Do not acquiesce to a tantrum
➢ Reframe from using anger when setting or administering boundaries.
➢ Do not complicate or mistake bad behaviour with a bad child
➢ Use time outs
➢ Coalesce rules, boundaries and limit setting with explanations

(Ahley: et al: 2011)

❖ Social workers need to be able to adapt their practice to different types of fathers in different situations.
In terms of working with fathers from Black and ethnic minority cultures then social workers must be culturally curious and talk with the father about what it means to be a father from his cultural perspective. What is the father’s role, what are his responsibilities, what additional stressors exist (i.e. racism, poverty and marginalisation), how would he define fatherhood from his specific perspective?

Practitioners need to consider how they will adapt their practice, as they need a variety of engagement formats so they can engage with; married fathers, co-habiting fathers, young fathers, non-residential fathers, in prisoned fathers, no recourse to public funds fathers or fathers with no immigration status, multiple fathers, boyfriends and step-fathers.

Fathers need to be clear about expectations, roles and communication between the social worker and him.

Other basic practice initiatives include:

- Be honest,
- Be flexible in terms of home visit times
- Provide the father with observations and feedback particularly positives and areas of development,
- Develop the quality of the working relationship with the father,
- Provide fathers with an opportunity to tell their story,
- Understand masculinity to enhance your practice for example; many men like technology and to communicate by email or texting additionally men respond well to structure i.e. a clear CIN or CP plan.
- The father needs to know, (if he is worried for the welfare of his children), that the social worker can be an ally to monitor the welfare of the children
- Likewise; be honest with the mother about the father’s involvement in the social work intervention

4. Engaging Non-Residential Fathers

- Take into account where the father lives and the distance he has to travel when inviting him to meetings or child protection conferences.

Remember 50% of fathers who are in contact with Children Social Care are non-residential and 50% are in employment. Work is crucial to masculine identity and so this needs to be respected. Social workers need to schedule around fathers’ work commitments.
Often non-residential fathers will have other children. It is important to be aware of how practically, emotionally and financially difficult it is to manage more than one family and when we consider triangulation it is inevitable that one of the families will suffer.

When assessing non-residential fathers consider:

- Assess the type of relationship the child has with the non-residential father
- His current living and contact arrangements
- Assess how the non-residential father fits within the family system (because he has an important impact on the family dynamics)
- Assess and understand the role the non-residential father plays in contributing to the maltreatment of the child or in helping to protect the child, (he may offer a suitable placement and offset the maltreatment).
- Is there another man living in the house?


5. Engaging Perpetrators or abusers

- Ensure there is a safety plan for the child, mother and social worker before engaging the abuser. (See Appendix7.5).

Assessments need to deconstruct the risks, causes and complications surrounding the violence and must pay attention to the stressors in the family. (See the Barnardos Risk Assessment Matrix or CAADA). This will include:

- Past / recent physical violence, past use of weapons against women / partners, use of firearms, sexual violence, threats of murder, extreme jealousy and controlling behaviours. (Blacklock: 2011).
- The assessment must include how the violence impacts on all those involved.
- Name violence to women as unacceptable and must stop
- Provide individual and group interventions which pay attention to parenting
- Respect men who want to change
- Fathers need to be informed of the impact of their violence on their child’s development
- Father should be involved in the child protection process. (They should be offered an appointment to meet with the chair of the conference before and after the conference).
- Social workers need to recognise the difficulties and barriers to survivors of domestic violence accessing services and plan responses accordingly.
Fathers’ abuse of their children must be addressed. Be honest about the problem and identify actions that need to be taken to prevent further maltreatment. Abusive parents must acknowledge their abuse. They must then apologise to their child as this benefits children’s recovery. (Rosenberg & Wilcox: 2006)

Social workers should be supported, (through supervision, rigorous local authority procedures, training and safety planning), so they are not disempowered by violent men. Social workers need to be supported to engage despite the complexities of the power and gender relationships which must be taken into account by employing organisations.

Abusive men can be controlling and manipulative and so they will often display these behaviours through as a sense of entitlement and narcissism. Confronting these behaviours must be the priority of any social work intervention.

‘Maltreating fathers typically do not seek intervention voluntarily, nor are they intrinsically motivated to change their parenting style’. In response, social workers need a clear framework and tight boundaries to guide their interventions to engage abusers. (Scott & Crooks: 2004, p 101). These boundaries may include:

- Application of a risk assessment (CAADA or Barnardos Risk Assessment Matrix)
- Joint work with the Criminal Courts and Probation Services; (in terms of injunctions, community orders, IDAP and Caring Dads).
- Joint work with the family courts, (in private proceedings), in relation to s.7 reports, injunctions, contact orders and Prohibitive Steps Orders.
- Application of the MARAC and MAPPA processes
- Joint work with the voluntary sector to support survivors escape the violence and maintain separation.
- Joint work with the Police’s Community Safety team and the Child Abuse Investigation Teams in the identification and protection of survivors and in the arrest and conviction of abusers.
- Application of the Child in Need process
- Application of Child Protection Procedures and a Child Protection Plan
- Application of the Public Law Outline (PLO)
- Application of s.31 Care Proceedings

6. Training needs of Social Workers
Social workers need the following training in relation to working with fathers:

1. Exploring local, national and international research (see Chapters 2 & 3).
2. Identifying fathers, obstacles to engaging fathers who are deemed a risk – engaging with reluctance and the reasons for it, talking with fathers about risk, dealing with denial and developing a dialogue about his violence: (there also needs to be a segment on masculinity i.e. understanding masculinity and male behaviours).
3. Assessing and managing his risk.
4. Case analysis; group exploration of a case and taking stock.
5. I would also suggest a session on social workers own assumptions and prejudices in working with men (including personal and organisational defences). Additionally what can social workers expect from supervision in working with men?
6. Domestic violence; particularly working with perpetrators and the training in the Barnardos Risk Assessment Matrix and CAADA.
7. Social workers need to be confident to be able to work with the couple relationships if parents remain together. Where there is separation and conflict, (for example in the process of a s.7 report), social workers need the skills to work with both parents. They need to be given the techniques to navigate the often conflictual adults’ relationships to remain focused on the child. Couple work can illicit very daunting and powerful feelings in the social worker leaving them lacking in confidence to ‘warring’ parents. Therefore; training in family therapy techniques would clearly benefit social workers and managers.

Part 2

1. Guide for Managers

- Adopt and implement the seven point plan to include fathers. (See Appendices: 6.1).
- Adopt and commit to a paternal pledge. (See Appendices: 6.1).
- Challenge the silence and lead discussions in your organisations about how to work with abusive men.
- Commit strategically and long term to the engagement of fathers in terms of partnering and parenting
- Value and understand the importance of fathers to the service provision process
- Involve the Local Safeguarding Children’s Board and include it in their strategic long term plans
- Regularly audit to ensure fathers involvement is improving
- Regularly and repeatedly ask social workers about fathers as this will encourage staff and they are aware of what is expected of them.
- Managers need to enforce, (through job descriptions, person specifications and appraisal targets), that social workers are expected to demonstrate ‘due diligence’ in their efforts to locate the father. This should become a practice expectation.

- Fathers, (like most of us), want continuity and consistency. Fathers do not want changes in their child’s allocated social workers and they do not want students.
- Do not minimise the impact of the work on social workers who need to feel empowered and confident to work with men. To achieve this they must feel safe, (physically and emotionally), and be given the meaningful supervision and the necessary skills and practical supports to include fathers.
The organisation, facilitation and management of contact needs to be improved through discussion in social work team and possibly additional training.

Managers need to initiate and institutionalise Safety Planning throughout their social work structure as outlined in Appendix 7.5.

Managers need to provide containing, safe and sophisticated supervision to enable practitioners to disclose their feelings and fears and how this impacts on their ability to engage fathers.

Managers need to implement a criteria to exclude fathers which will include cases where the father is: An untreated, convicted sex offender, a perpetrator of intense domestic violence, (Barnardos Matrix 4), an unwillingness to participate in treatment for domestic violence, in violation of a no-contact order with the mother or child, and or unwilling to participate in services to the extent that the social worker articulates concerns that the father’s involvement endangers the child. (Hahn et al: 2011 & Smithgall et al: 2009).

The expectation would then be that social workers evidence how the father achieves this criterion in their assessment. All men that do not achieve this criterion are included in social work assessments.

Managers need to receive similar trainings but also:

1. Implementing the safety planning procedure
2. Improving services to survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence.
3. Supervision specifically to identify; projection, transference and countertransference and how these operate when working with fathers.
4. To identify and discuss how social workers own biography may impact on how they work with men.
5. Personal and organisational defences.
6. I would also suggest that all managers be trained in providing a psychodynamic based supervision.
7. Train staff in diligent searches


2. Engaging Fathers: the Managers Role

An 8 point plan has been suggested for managers to adopt in relation to the engagement of fathers by social care:
1. Make fathers visible
2. Joint advocacy for mothers and fathers (as one sided advocacy will only increase polarisation.
3. Address health and safety of workers especially in relation to violence
4. Involve fathers early
5. Accept that fathers can have a positive role in the lives of children.
6. Always consider paternal as well as maternal extended family (via an FGC)
7. Develop specific strategies and interventions for young fathers
8. Focus on the basics; accurate recording keeping developing performance related information

- Managers need to provide social workers with the skills and resources to find family members and there needs to be greater use of DNA testing.

3. Engaging Perpetrators and Abusers; The Manager’s role

- Name violence to women as unacceptable and must stop.

- Commit strategically and operationally (long term) to confronting domestic violence by committing resources to survivors and perpetrators, (especially to develop local, modular, perpetrator programmes that recognise perpetrators are fathers).

- Ensure there is a safety plan for the child, mother and social worker before engaging the abuser. (See Appendices 6.2 & 7.5).

- Adopt a risk assessment framework for social workers and train them. For example the Barnardos Risk Assessment Matrix or the CAADA risk assessment model.


- Agencies need to develop a joint working protocol over how they are going to address domestic violence and the safeguarding of children.

- Managers need to recognise the difficulties and barriers to survivors of domestic violence accessing services and plan responses accordingly.
Managers need to initiate the Safety Planning Guidance as outlined in Appendices 6.2 & 7.5.

Managers need to recognise that working with abusers is difficult, complex and emotive and social workers need support and training to accomplish this successfully.

(Featherstone et al: 2010)

- Part 3

From a National Perspective

- I can’t help myself but appeal to; Government Departments, Health Services, Local Authorities and Police. All need to collectively recognise the dangerous and menacing impact of domestic violence on our children and our society and then collectively implement a long term strategy to reduce the incidents of domestic violence.
- Local Authorities need to lobby central government to establish a parent locator service and develop domestic violence courts.
- All undergraduate and postgraduate social work courses should include trainings in working with fathers and in combating the impact of domestic violence on children and families.
- In terms of Social Work education I can’t help but plead with any academic reading this thesis; please include a series of lectures on working with men and domestic violence. We will only stop the abuse if we engage the abuser!

Conclusion

This guide has been produced by practitioners for practitioners; it combines best practice initiatives from across the Western world of social work and applied by a group of committed social workers within the complex milieu of child protection